

Revved and ready

Unser Racing Museum, opening Monday, tells compelling story of family

BY AURELIO SANCHEZ
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Everybody knows the Unsers are a great sports racing story, but how many know they're also a compelling human and family story?

A new museum in Albuquerque will strive to tell a part of the Unser story not as recognizable as their highly public achievements on the race track.

"One of the things that impressed me was that the Unsers are really down-to-Earth people who never forgot that they were common people. Even though they had all of these amazing accomplishments, they were always very humble," Clay Gish, director of writing and research for ESI Design, said in a phone interview. ESI Design is a New York company that designed museum exhibits for the Unser Racing Museum.

Four-time Indianapolis 500 winner Al Unser Sr. will open the museum Monday, Sept. 19, for the Unser family, whose members have won nine, or 10 percent, of the Indy 500 races since it started in 1911.

Only A.J. Foyt and Rick Mears have won as many Indy 500s as Al Unser Sr. Bobby Unser has won three Indy 500 races and Al Unser Jr. has won two races.

The museum will showcase not only race cars and racing artifacts, but also the personalities that populated the Unsers'

lives in the fast lane, from the gravel roads of Pikes Peak to the brickyards of Indianapolis.

"We want visitors to feel the adrenaline, sense the anxiety and share the thrill that we go through in every race," Al Unser Sr. said in a release from Rowland Communications in New York.

"For years people have been dropping by the garage to catch a glimpse of winning cars," he continued in the release. "Susan and I thought it would be great to give them more of an experience and maybe even feel like part of our family."

The exhibit is designed to be an open window into the history of open-wheel racing, Gish said.

"I was amazed to learn that through the four generations of the Unser racing dynasty, their time in racing has really mirrored the evolution of the sport," Gish said.

"They were not only good racers, but also wonderful mechanics so they were able to at times transform the sport and make it better," she added.

Visitors to the museum will be greeted with the sight of Big Al's Johnny Lightning Special, the 1971 Indy 500 winner. Themed galleries will branch out with artifacts, images and films telling the story of some of the family's most memorable racing feats.

The Pikes Peak gallery, called "Race to the Clouds," includes a massive mural backdrop. Twelve Unsers have raced, and many have won. The race was first won by Louis Unser in 1934. Bobby Unser has a dozen wins.

Another gallery features family patriarch Jerry Unser opening his garage in 1936 in Albuquerque. Gish described the exhibit as a three-dimensional Unser family scrapbook,

told through quotes in graphics on the walls and through images and films.

"People will hear them talk about what it was like for them," Gish said. "They did it the old-fashioned way, with hard work and perseverance."

Gish said the design team knew that racing enthusiasts would go to the museum, but the team also wanted to make it compelling for people who might not be racing fans.

"The cars are stunning, but we tried to design the exhibits from a lot of different angles, and one very important one was that the Unser family is a very human story, told through the lives of the family," she said.

The dynasty boasts two young racers coming up through the ranks: Al Unser III and Jason Tanner, Gish said.

"It's a story still being told," Gish said.



BIG AL'S FAMOUS JOHNNY LIGHTNING SPECIAL, THE 1971 INDY 500 WINNER, WILL BE FEATURED AS THE CENTRAL EXHIBIT AT THE UNSER RACING MUSEUM.